**NEH Chairman William "Bro" Adams. Remarks at the event: "Lincoln's Legacy: The 13th Amendment, 150 Years Later" at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

[NEH Chairman, William Adams]

Good evening and thank you so much for being with us here tonight. I want to thank and congratulate Jeff Rosen on this extraordinary initiative and thank him as well for inviting me to be here. I'm honored in several ways to be among the distinguished people you will hear from tonight: wonderful company—Sandra Day O'Connor in virtual space, and here physically, David Rubinstein and the distinguished panelists you'll hear from in a minute, and our associations, secondly, with the broader project about which Jeff briefly spoke.

The reasons we're so compelled with that project are four.

1. This topic, that we're talking about tonight, the 13, 14th, and 15th Amendments, with the emphasis on the 13th, is in itself, of course, an enormously important historical moment in American life and history;
2. But it also has, secondly, enormous contemporary relevance (and I know that's going to come up tonight);
3. It is perfectly fitted to the mission of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the work that we do; and
4. It is perfectly fitted with the initiative that I announced in January called the *Common Good.*

Let me touch very briefly on those points.

Jeff calls and Sandra Day O'Connor calls this very rightly the "second founding", this celebration and this moment in history. It was, of course, the monumental expansion of the meaning of the Revolution and of 1787, making equality coequal with liberty in the way we think about our constitutional heritage; and ever since then equality has been, of course, one of the most important touchstones of our political and social lives. The one hundred and fifty years since that time, of course, those years have turned in many ways on the struggle to define the legal and political and social meaning of those critical amendments, including the amendment that followed some years later, the 19th Amendment in 1920.

I use that word *struggle* deliberately and advisedly. Struggle in the sense, first of all, as we know, in the constitutional argument that we have in this country constantly and the debate about the meaning of the Constitution and the implications of equality in that constitutional structure. But also, struggle in a different sense and maybe more common-sense form as it's played out in broad popular movements as well as in institutional political settings, which of course, these amendments have done.

They are, of course, enormously important in our contemporary politics. We continue to struggle with the meaning of these amendments; first of all, in the constitutional sense, we're debating it still and I'm sure we will continue to debate it for many years. But also they inform our political debates and arguments about equality as defining elements of our time.

It is undoubtedly the case that we've seen a great deal of progress since the 13th Amendment. I mentioned the 19th Amendment, and then, of course, the watershed moments in history since: the civil

rights movement of the 1960s for example, and the monumental legislation of that time: the Civil Rights Acts 1964 and 1968, the Voting Rights Act of 1964, and other important things that happened in the civil rights movement. And then, of course, the election of Barak Obama in 2008, the first African American president of the United States.

Even as we're aware of that progress, and it has been significant, we are aware of the limits of that progress. And we became very painfully aware of the limits this last summer in Ferguson and Staten Island and Bedford Stuyvesant.

So, this project that is being launched tonight is really in every sense, living history, and it's a critically important form of civic engagement for this country at this point in time in our history.
It is also perfectly fitted as I said, with the mission of National Endowment for the Humanities.

Speaking of the 1960s, by the way, we are going to be celebrating this year, our fiftieth anniversary. We were founded as part of that burst of legislation in the mid-60s, on September 29, 1965, when President Johnson signed the act that created the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities.

In the congressional language in that bill that created us, there were two fundamental charges.

1. One was and still is to advance and contribute to the great humanities tradition that goes in the West, of course, all the way back to Greeks and beyond and in other parts of the world, of course, an equally deep and great traditions;
2. But also and secondly, very importantly, to engage the pubic by connecting that tradition to the circumstances of contemporary life. Those are words that come right from our legislation.

And at that very heart of that work of connecting to the circumstances of contemporary life has been our effort to illuminate, support discussion of the history and of foundational principles of American democracy, and connect those principles to the way in which we live now

And that is what led me, frankly, this last January, to announce a new initiative called *The Common Good: The Humanities in Public Square*. The purpose of which is to bring humanists, humanities knowledge and understanding, and humanities organizations to bear upon the grand challenges that we face in contemporary American life. And, the rationale for that urge to bring those traditions to bear on our circumstances is this (and it's very simple, I think). The grand challenges we face as a people now in this time are not principally technical or scientific challenges, they are challenges that bear upon our history and our culture, our ideas and our values. And it is in addressing those spheres of life that the humanities, I think, really shine.

So we need them; we need their methods and we need their forms of knowledge. And, no challenge could be larger and more important than continuing the public discussion and debate regarding the meaning of Lincoln's legacy and in our current circumstances. And so for us at NEH, this initiative at the National Constitution Center is a perfect embodiment of what we are trying to achieve.

I'll close with a very brief anecdote about my mornings in Southeast Washington, as I get up and get ready to go to work. I moved to that part of Washington, the Southeast, when I moved to Washington in July, It's my habit, because I'm a cyclist, to get up and ride my bike in the morning and I do, three days a week at least. And I typically go out past the Waterfront, around Haines Point (some of you might be

aware of that geography), past the Jefferson Memorial; and I go and turn around the Lincoln Memorial. And it's occurred to me, as I've done that every morning, that we have so mythologized, in some ways, Lincoln, and embedded him in a kind of almost unreachable realm, that I think we forget about the contemporary circumstances and the contemporary meanings of his legacy for the ways that we have to live now. And if I am ever tempted to forget it, the other part of my morning typically involves a Metro ride. I get on the Green Line at the Navy Yard (some of you might know that station). And I ride two stops to L'Enfant Plaza, where I get out and I go upstairs and go to work. The train, as it arrives in the Navy Yard, is coming from Anacostia and the 8th Ward, which is just across the river. The Anacostia is a neighborhood that is 97-percent African American, and it is one of the poorer neighborhoods, not just in Washington, but in that entire region of the country. It has a long and distinguished history, by the way. Frederick Douglass was born there. But then and now it remains, I think, an emblem of racial segregation in our nation's capital. We have lots of different disagreements about the role of the federal government in addressing segregation and the causes of segregation in this form. But it is a material fact that we need to keep in mind, as we ponder Lincoln's legacy and the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments.

Thanks again to Jeff and the National Constitution Center. We're very proud to be involved in this partnership and we thank you all for your engagement with us. Thank you very much.